

Web Browsers: The Best of the Net



November 2010 Volume 11 Number 11 Free

The Computer Paper

The Ultimate Media PC:
Enter Online To Win

Social Networking:
How Not to Get on the Ballot

Photo Sharing:
Making Your Pics Count

Power Pellets:
Top 10 PC Game Developers



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The Feed

from www.hubcanada.com

Breaking News

Guns To Killish Conference In QC
By Matt Smith

Building on the success of the first ever Vancouver Game Summit in 2007, the Game Developers Conference (GDC) has announced that it will be coming to Vancouver for Digital Week in May of 2009. The Vancouver Game Summit is dedicated to bringing the Canadian sector into the forefront of game development.
www.hubcanada.com/feed/489

Science Hitches in Canada
By Susan Nicholson

Good news arrived recently for those looking to purchase computer supplies or equipment online, as a time in the future has come up from the United States looking to expand into the Canadian market. After seven years operating solely in the States, Newegg.com will be broadening its horizons with the launch of Newegg.ca
www.hubcanada.com/feed/490

First Ever Mobile Film Festival Scheduled For 09
By Matt Smith

What if you found yourself attending a film festival and taking your seat beside silver screens icons Robert Redford and Isabella Rossellini? And what if Redford or Rossellini were there to judge movies as their mobile phones? Well, that is likely what is going to take place at the inaugural 2009 Global Mobile Film Festival.
www.hubcanada.com/feed/492

Canon and Avri Launch Team Up
By Kevin Freeman

Canon has officially joined up with Canadian rocker Avri Lavigne in order to sell its Rebel SLR series and the ELPH compact line at good and great camera. Lavigne made a special appearance to kick off the campaign in downtown Toronto on October 26, hoping to prove that Canon cameras are "the best damn thing".
www.hubcanada.com/feed/514

Maclean's On Campus Virtual Fair Debuts
By Matt Smith

Attending a college or university fair in person is time consuming and the crowds and speaker presentations can make the fair overwhelming. But what if you could attend a university fair without ever having to travel there and stand in-lineup? This is what Maclean's has created Maclean's On Campus Virtual Fair.
www.hubcanada.com/feed/509

ISM Association to Make Broadband Ubiquitous
By Susan Nicholson

The advent of the Internet has made many tasks easy and convenient to perform

online, from communications to travel to banking and even working in many cases. The steadily falling price of Wi-Fi laptops and 3G-enabled phones has helped to make the Internet a necessity not only for all things, but in all places.
www.hubcanada.com/feed/499

Paranatic Sponsors WWF's Arctic Program
By Susan Nicholson

Melting glaciers, stranded polar bears, increased water levels... Anyone who has seen The Day After Tomorrow or An Inconvenient Truth knows the concerns. That's why the WWF's International Arctic Program is working to combat climate change and save the ice caps. Thanks to Paranatic, the program will be getting some much needed support to implement its four-point approach to protecting the environment.
www.hubcanada.com/feed/500

MS Office: QT Case Retire With Advertisers
By Matt Smith

Tired of using too many user commands for Microsoft Office 2007? Well, Autodesk has announced a new face-lift feature for 2007 that brings the interface to something a little closer to the more familiar Office. EA The newest version v13.02 sports a light-weight interface that will make MS Office users.
www.hubcanada.com/feed/504

New Products

PSP Launches New Family Bundle
By Susan Nicholson

In the middle of last month, Sony announced the release of a new package deal for the PSP, a family-oriented bundle that would include Resident A. Clark, Ace Mothers as well as a voucher to download another title from the PlayStation Store. The PSP included is also an updated model, the PSP 3000, which features glare reduction...
www.hubcanada.com/feed/508

Snapcase Unveils Momentus D400 5. Hard Drive
By Susan Nicholson

The laptop computer has evolved considerably over the past several years, changing from a device meant to perform a small portion of the tasks a desktop computer can to a machine that is meant to match or exceed the expectations of modern desktops. In order to do that, portable computers must be able to compete with the hard drive capacity and access speed that desktop PCs have.
www.hubcanada.com/feed/490

Nero Releases New Media Software
By Susan Nicholson

With the release of Nero 9 last month Nero is attempting to provide their customers with a product that is both an improved version of the classic software and also an all-in-one solution that will allow users to manipulate a variety of files in a multitude of ways. Many of the features of the improved software are the result of listening to what the customers wanted to see...
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Perhaps in each parent's scenario, "the button to have loved and lost." Goodbye... Fine. But... well. Good day so... I just... good it's... I'll... and... after... and... of... the... this...

Long time HUB: The Computer Paper readers will recognize this as another photo of me. That makes it the second that I've written in the last 10 or so years I've been editor of HUB: The Computer Paper and its previous forms and formats. Last time I wrote my parting editor's letter while sitting on a plane somewhere over the ocean on my way to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, where I was to be editor of a city-wide magazine. That turned out to be more

of a substitution than a true parting of ways, as this additional now affects but this time it's a little different.

This time, I've accepted a new editor position in Toronto, working with some great editorial and business minds. Friends and in some cases, HUB: Digital Letter and HUB: The Computer Paper stores.

The HUB: TCP stores are being passed to Denise Helouian where before you will have seen on our website: www.hubcanada.com and a great while the pages of the magazine you hold in your hands. I guess will bring a new way of thinking about the magazine and website and I look forward to seeing them both grow and change under her editorship as I believe, should you. He's currently ceased working with me over the past several months and he's going to start his own business. So long as he doesn't try to lay claim to the thousands of posts, USB keys, Halo 3 tickets / DVD case holders, Lego Batman figures and various other PR artifacts I've accumulated over the years.

Though I'm leaving the HUB: TCP editor's desk, you can't get rid of me quite that easily.

I'll continue to consult with Denise and with Piccolo Publishing so we don't lose sight of where the magazine came from and where we hope to take it — things like

learned a lot about in my years in the biz. That said though, my role will be a small one and it's done with baby arms. It's in good hands.

But in true nostalgic fashion, I'd like to talk about my some more.

It's by working with some sharp minds at Toronto, working on a new web-focused website. This new site will see the benefit of the team's collective years of experience and aims to simplify computing for beginners, novice and intermediate computer users and intermediate computing to the more advanced on the average. I'll be working on downloadable software library to help computer users do more in less time. The concept is for "soft, sticky technology content." We soft launch shortly after the state of HUB: TCP hits the streets. More on that in the weeks to come. This new role started when former TCP and HUB: Digital Letter products editor Sean Connolly approached me with the details and as I learned more from several members (Andy Walker, it's far to say I got excited about this new project. We'll be working together closely and I can't wait to start down this new road and see what possibilities it has in store. To say nothing of the chance to work with friends and colleagues I have a lot of respect for.

The factor is that I'll be working a mere 200m away from the Piccolo Publishing offices (according to Google Maps) in the Liberty Village neighborhood that's been such a great place for us to work and play. Moving the HUB office to this new locale represented a change of more than just scenery for the HUB team. It was something of a fresh start. So now, who I'm looking forward to seeing new lunch time, work time and out time come along with my new colleagues. I can still meet up with my friends at HUB for lunch, coffee or a couple of parties after work.

Though I'm certainly excited to start my new project, I'm disappointed I won't be at HUB to see the improvements, the growth and the new ideas that this publication will enjoy from behind the editor's author's magical desk. That said, I'm looking forward to seeing what's next for HUB: The Computer Paper and www.hubcanada.com. Both as a bit-part player and — perhaps more importantly — as a reader.

Enjoy the tour
Andrew Moon-Grasin
Editor-in-Chief

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Social Networking

Wherein the simple act of knowing people becomes fine art

According to Internet search firm Alexa.com, social networking website Facebook is the world's fifth most popular website. Video-sharing service YouTube sits two spots ahead in third, and Facebook competitor MySpace ranks comfortably in seventh in Canada. Facebook ranks even higher, at number two, while YouTube and MySpace are fifth and fourth respectively. What can we learn from all that? No, we can say that people really enjoy using the Internet as a conduit for human interaction. Considering that the Internet is ultimately all about people and communication, one might think that social networking has been part of the landscape since the very beginning. And indeed it has. In fact, both the urge and the facilities to network socially via linked computers existed even before the Internet became a publicly available and publicly accepted entity.

Anyone old enough to remember the early days of the personal computer (let's think Babbage's Calculus and someone's mother) will likely also remember those first few primitive PC-to-PC serial links. CompuServe, which has since morphed into an Internet service provider of some note, was one. Though it began its life in the pre-PC days of the 1970s as a mainframe computer communication solution for the business world, by the late 1980s CompuServe had expanded into the public domain as a hub of sorts for the growing legion of PC proponents and enthusiasts.

You are not alone.

CompuServe allowed members to share files and access news and events, but it also offered something far better — attention. Not only could members send messages to one another via a nonphysical technology called email (the concept of email wasn't exactly newsworthy, though widespread public access to it wasn't), but they could also communicate on message via CompuServe's discussion forums.

Networking in the hundreds and countless bodies of topics. CompuServe's forums proved tremendously popular and paved the way for the modern domains we know today.

More old school computer user networks could be found in the form of the "BBS" (Bulletin Board System). Often more local in nature than the CompuServe sites, the BBSs were usually run by hobbyists who carefully nurtured the social aspects and interest specific nature of their projects and even arranged for expensive meet-and-greets between members.

If you, after all, owned a computer in the early and somewhat isolated days of the PC to know there were other computer freaks out there who shared the same passions as you.

Soon commercial online services such as AOL (America Online) grew to prominence, essentially offering most of the features and capabilities the Internet would eventually have, all within a self-contained but heavily-rendered format. AOL, in particular, is noteworthy for the member-to-member connections it encouraged. If there is a true precursor to today's social networking sites, it was truly spawned under the AOL umbrella.

But everything changed as the 1990s marched on. The Internet went mainstream. Personal computers grew from a quirky luxury to a necessary. And social networking became an entity unto itself.

It's debatable which site can lay claim to being the first, though Classmates.com certainly tallied some of the modern derivatives of a social networking site when it launched in 1995. Still, it was primarily a "Who went to my school?" service until much later in its history. Early users could not, for example, create profiles. Nor could they really break free from the site's initial reunion philosophy. Still,

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Christian can be named — and at times feared — to this day.

Karen Bevan, leader of the revolution.

The same cannot be said for the site that's most often acknowledged as the first to deliver all the parameters of true social networking. Based on the six degrees of separation theory that asserts no person is separated by more than six degrees from another, SixDegrees.com was born in 1997. It allowed members to create profiles, make friends, access groups, and surf other parties. And of course, it asked its user base to continually feed the six degrees concept by encouraging them to bring more people into the fold.

As time went on, even the site's sponsors got in on the act by trying, via actually site invites, to increase membership. The unfortunate result? A highly loose association of computer users and numerous complaints of spam-filled membership drives. SixDegrees.com eventually closed its doors and after the fun of the millennium, thus proving the old axiom that luxury is not always better.

But the stage had been set. By the early years of this decade, a wide variety of social networking websites had appeared, each trying to capture the imaginations of potential members. Some, such as eGroups.com, established in 1999, kept the social interactivity in the background in favor of consumer information. Others, such as AvianVenus.com (1997) to date and BlackPlanet.com (1999) to date, targeted specific demographics. And we won't even get into the phenomena of online dating (chronicled elsewhere in this issue) except to say that it had become a viable entry loop before the debut of the last commercial matchmaking services.

In need of a friend?

Nevertheless, it was with the 2002 launch of Friendster (www.friendster.com) that the template for today's social networking website became firmly established. Like SixDegrees.com, Friendster made use of a degree of separation routine, but it also promoted the idea that a rich online community can exist only between people who truly have common bonds. An emphasis that altered many of the same traits we would find at an online dating site certainly didn't seem to hurt.

The concept worked, and just a year after it began, Friendster boasted more than three million registered users. Though the service has since seen its fair share of technical difficulties and a drop in its North American fortunes, it remains a huge force in Asia and, currently, a new necessity in the Philippines.

In 2003, social networking met science with the introduction

of LinkedIn (www.linkedin.com). Designed as a resource for businesspeople to maintain and expand a list of trusted contacts, make new connections and network amongst themselves, LinkedIn registered well out of the clouds and today has more than 24 million registered users.

An even greater success story can be found in the form of MySpace (www.myspace.com). Also launched in 2003, MySpace replaced many of Friendster's most popular features and capitalized on its shortcomings through a campaign designed to reduce alienated Friendster members. Storing with the much-cherished young adult demographic and very friendly to musical artists and bands, MySpace not alone stole the social networking throne until surpassed by social site Facebook earlier this year.

The Facebook

Indeed, a big reason Facebook has become so incredibly popular in its practice is because such as Canada. While MySpace maintains its lead in the United States, it's a completely different story north of the border. Why? Explanations abound, but it likely boils down to a phenomenon known as the "tipping point." In simple terms, a tipping point occurs when "the momentum for change becomes unstoppable." It seems that here in the true north strong and true, Facebook — rather through its interface, its ease of use, its features, or something as basic as its name — gained popularity so quickly that people interested in social networking couldn't help but join its ranks. If, indeed, it's currently the place to be seen in the Canadian social networking world.

But will it still be the place this time next year? Or the year after that? Not if the folks running Twitter (twitter.com) have their way. Not content with being a typical social networking service, Twitter added blogging to the equation and asks its users to answer the simple question, "What are you doing?" That it already sports over two million registered accounts and a separate version designed for the Japanese market bodes well for its future.

Of course, when there's a Twitter, there's bound to be copycats. And to date, the most promising of these is Finnish-founded Jaku (www.jaku.com). What does Jaku have that Twitter doesn't? It was purchased the first last year by Google. Full stop.

There are dozens and perhaps hundreds of other social networking concerns that, at one time or another, believed their concept was the way of the future. Some still exist today, but many more have fallen by the wayside. And so it goes in the online world.

One thing is certain: the battle is just heating up.

By Gail Goble



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The Anti-Social Net

Debating the merits of social networking... with a few reasons why not to partake

I've heard plenty of great stories that make a strong case for social media websites like Facebook, MySpace and Linked In. Among my friends it is follow who travels cautiously. Rather than picking up a massive cellphone bill or sending out impersonal, late-night e-mails to all of his friends' desktops, he simply updates his MySpace profile with pictures and messages about his travels. His friends can check in and see how he is doing whenever they like and type out quick messages if they have something to ask or report about their own lives.

No question, social networking sites can be great tools for keeping people apprised of your life. They're also becoming a vital part of some professions. My wife, who works in public relations, has a colleague who was laid in a job after he lost how many Facebook contacts she had.

Real-world repercussions

The war story the internet's way of taking an abrupt measurement of the degree to which she had integrated personal networking technology into her life. As well as a quick means of determining how connected she was. Few friends — or, worse yet, no Facebook account — would have indicated that she had poor networking skills. (Luckily for her her Facebook friends list numbered in the high hundreds.)

And, of course, social networking can offer plenty of warning distractions. Just about anyone I know is hooked on a Facebook application called *World's Best Friends*, but with just six letters and older, multiplayer functionality. As a matter of fact, I recently attended a marriage (that is to say, wedding) party hosted by a Redwood-dwelling friend in which lovers of the genre were organized into groups for a friendly competition.

Despite these and other benefits that come with adopting social networking technologies, I have repeatedly referred to log on toward this particular cultural tool.

My concern to social networking might seem incongruous with my chosen profession — surely a tech journalist ought to be among the first to adopt new web-based services — but it is precisely my experience as a technology enthusiast that originally led me from joining any online network.

Caught in a web

My understanding is that most popular cultural websites and online applications are essentially ladders that come and go with social media. What's more, so are sites or services now becoming the standard for all users — Facebook may be the most popular social network amongst Geners at the moment, but there are still those who prefer MySpace, Microsoft Live Spaces, LinkedIn, or any of a number of smaller, niche services.

The upshot: I have so started in taking the time to set up a personal profile on a site that becomes it but, I don't want to regularly update my profile on half-a-dozen different sites to make sure that my friends who don't happen to use my chosen social network can see what's happening in my life.

Then there's the trading factor: I realize that plenty of people enjoy using social networking applications to find long-lost acquaintances and either reconnect with them or gossip about them with their current chums. This functionality simply doesn't appeal to me. I have no particular desire to connect with friends past. What's more, I prefer that people I once loved not to have the ability to easily find out information about me.

Which leads to an inescapable element of social networking that causes me moderate concern: The ability for anyone — from employers to police investigators — to pass judgment on someone based on what they discover in the information people post on their Facebook or MySpace profiles.

Not silent!

I have a friend who admitted to not being someone because he checked out the applicant's Facebook page and disapproved of his moral taste. This is not uncommon. In researching a story I wrote earlier this year about how sales searches are being used to screen job applicants, I spoke with several executives and a spokesperson from the Human Resources Professionals Association of Ontario. All of them agreed that the Internet has become a valuable tool in helping employers screen candidates, and several stated that papers from social media services are chief among the online resources they check.

More and more, social networks are not so innocently careful face the prospect of identity theft: inadvertently revealing their own reputation or even making the threat of physical harm," wrote Nath Hurler of the Globe and Mail after conducting a two-month investigation this summer into what can be gleaned about strangers by leaving tabs on their social networking pages.

The random people he tracked were stunned by what he was able to find out about them, everything from cellphone numbers and home addresses to detailed calendars listing personal and social events.

Keeping it private

Of course, many social networking services provide extensive privacy options to let users keep their profiles unsearchable and hidden from everyone save those whom they personally invite to have access. But the latter defaults the primary purpose of social networking, which is to create strengthening communities that allow people to easily communicate with friends and family, meet new people with similar interests, and connect with professional colleagues to do business.

However, if I'm being completely honest, the real reason I continue to not become involved in social networking is the same reason I've switched all of earlier messenger services to me.

Over the years I've watched my friends, family, and colleagues become obsessed with checking their MySpace, Facebook, and LinkedIn profiles. I've seen them spend whole hours on these sites after they play games, comment on friends' pictures, take snapshots, post comments on other users' profiles, and keep up with friend requests. I don't want to look any of these activities. They all have their own purpose and value.

But they're also serious time drains that I find I can't afford to get roped into.

So social networking, just on my lap, I understand its importance, significance, and value. But in my case, its benefits simply don't balance out its disadvantages. And if this little trouble doesn't get my friends, family, and colleagues to stop sending me e-mails to join their various networks, I don't know what will.

By Chad Sipola

In the Lab: Web Browsers

Browsing for the best of the Net

The web has become ubiquitous. So much so that we may not even think about how we go about accessing it. Since virtually all PCs come preinstalled with Windows and therefore Internet Explorer, it's easy to ignore the fact that there are other viable alternative web browsers available.

Web browsers such as Safari have been available for years on the Mac, but only a short time on the PC. At the same time, browsers such as Mozilla Firefox have established themselves on both Macs and PCs, and Google's Chrome browser which was released only a couple of months back has a nice OS/2 version in the works as well.

This month in the Lab, we are going to test out some of these other browsers — and Internet Explorer, too — to see how they stack up against each other. We'll be looking at overall usability, security, while an important caveat has been covered previously in HUB and won't be touched in this article.

The browsers will be tested for their ease of use, features and reliability among other things, and will also be put through a simple Java speed test.

The test was found at a website (codecademy.com/webdesign/compare.php) where a simple Java button is hit, up and various data is collected, most importantly the duration of the test. I took an hour with each browser after briefly opening them and found the results speak.

There are also results given there, which you may compare with my results or even your own if you're so inclined.

Internet Explorer (v7.0 SP2.0.12)

Available on: Windows XP SP2 and up; OS: 7.02

Setting point: The first web browser most will try hands on

Pros

The default web browser of Windows PCs

World's most commonly used browser

Web developers generally develop for IE standards

Anyone who has used Windows has probably used Internet Explorer (IE). Simply put, it is the browser to beat. Although there are other options for PC users now — thankably, some might say — IE remains the default web browser for any and all PCs that come with Windows. Because of this, most computer users have had at least some experience with IE, possibly before switching to something different. Regardless, everyone knows what IE is, what it looks like, and some of the basics of what it does, and it therefore deserves some praise for being the most widely used web browser in the world.

Produced and developed by Microsoft, IE first came out in 1995 shortly after Netscape Navigator entered on the scene. The simultaneous presence of these two browsers caused the browser wars of the late '90s, which IE eventually won.

IE 7 is the current version, has seen a decline in overall user base over the past years and has identified some users by being compatible only with the Windows OS, and more specifically only with Windows XP Service Pack 2 and up. Also, there have been reports of instability in the new IE, which has proven most reliable with Windows Vista.

Despite these criticisms, Internet Explorer has improved its overall usability in recent times, with version 7 adding tabbed browsing and an RSS reader, two features that were sorely lacking in previous versions.

It is not friendly toward customization, either for moving the essential buttons on the toolbar around or for installing plugins.

Accessing browsing history and favorites is similar to previous versions and clearing Internet history is as easy as clicking the first option under Tools.

Opening four tabs in IE, Netscape, Midori, eCite, and Yahoo did take up about 85 MB of memory, which is about average.

Java speed test: 1646 6 ms (test)

It's a well known fact that IE has trouble with Java. Whether it's a business decision or a lack of foresight, the browser has largely neglected Java. Still, more than a second and a half to pass this test makes it the slowest browser by more than four times. Quick.

Firefox (v 3.0.3)

Available on: Windows, Mac OS/2, Linux, Unix derivatives

Setting point: Customizability, plugins

Pros

Open source

Thousands of add-ons available

Cons

The short number of add-ons can be disturbing

Resource intensive

Supported by many OS

Originally built on Netscape Navigator code after it went open source, Mozilla Firefox (which is also open sourced) is now the second most popular web browser in the world. In addition, the release of Firefox 3 was met with more than 6 million downloads the day it was released, which set a Guinness World Record.

If that doesn't speak to its growing popularity then perhaps the sheer volume of add-ons, plugins, and other modifiers will. New ways of customizing Firefox are coming out all the time from sources all over the world, making it one of the fastest browsers to tailor to your specific needs. This is undeniably Firefox's strongest selling point.

Simply go to Tools and click Add-ons and you will get a list of successful plugins that you can install directly into Firefox. And if you decide you don't like one of them after using, just click either desire to temporarily turn the extension off, or choose uninstall to remove it completely. It's as easy as that.

Once a new plugin is installed, it will mostly name aspect at your browsing experience either a browser extension — which is unnecessary as Firefox can easily reroute browsing sessions. This modification can range from something simple like Speed Dial, which you can use to turn your home page into a checklist of frequently visited websites for convenient browsing, to plugins that allow users to view the search results by using "strutbars," mouse movements that function as hotkeys to be Black and White. (I also remember that name).

Firefox also works on a wide range of OSs, from Windows and Mac OS/2 to a variety of Linux variants.

Firefox 3 also added a searchable and productive address bar. Type in a few letters, found a site in your history and you can select it in the address bar (the H for bookmark, etc.) I won't even begin without noting a caveat. Also typing in phrases or words will initiate a Google search, which is convenient.

Not despite these steep merits, even Firefox is not without flaws. For one thing, Firefox is even more resource intensive than IE. When testing the browser with the four tabs added to the previously mentioned test pages, Firefox was using up just

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under 100-MB of memory. That's a lot, and that number could easily go up with more tabs or, presumably, with more extensions.
Also, the sheer number of plugins and such make it somewhat daunting to install the whole collection of Firefox and can cost a little bit of time. However, for many updates it's better than having none at all.

Java speed test: 359 (I use Java)

Pretty good, especially when compared to IE. In fact, only one browser, Opera, scored better on the Java speed test. However, it was roughly 12 per cent faster on average than Chrome or Safari.

Chrome (v. 0.2.148.30)

Available on Windows XP SP2 and up
Settings panel: Lean, tight and simple

Price

Integration with other apps like Google Docs
Includes browser for a nonlogged version

Uncluttered interface

As the newest addition to this battle of the browsers, Chrome, which was put out by the folks at Google not three months ago, has already earned some fans for its novel approach to browsing. One more simple in interface than Safari, the open source

Cost

Windows only

Feature-rich

Easy to use

Chrome's streamlined approach excels over a litany bar — although some of the more extended tools are available by clicking on the search button to the right of the address field. This grants access to the bookmarks and history as well as downloads.

Chrome also showed its class on the memory when the browser was tested on the test first site. With four tabs in one window Chrome took up roughly 62 MB of memory, more than 20 MB less than IE, and almost 40 MB less than Firefox. It also seemed to do so in four separate tasks as shown in task manager. This would be due to the underlying technology known as "sandboxing" that Chrome employs. What this does is it keeps the resources for each life separate in case of a total error, so if one tab goes down, the whole browser doesn't fall apart as is the case with its competitors whether it is browsing in multiple tabs or multiple windows. A unique feature offered by Chrome is its integration with online apps. Unlike the limited menu options in an entry that lets users create desktop, start menu or quick launch shortcuts to online applications. This feature is designed to bridge the gap between online and offline apps.

While early adopters of Google's Chrome browser were inspired by them and user license agreement (EULA) "I'm Google's personal, accessible, worldwide, royalty-free, and nonexclusive license to reproduce, adapt, modify, translate, publish publicly perform, publicly display and distribute any content which you submit, post or display on or through, the Services." This was apparently an oversight. A subsequent update of the EULA has removed the sentence, making the browser much more palatable.

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Java speed test: 380.2 ms (avg)

This is an acceptable score, although not an ideal one. Coming in at the slow end of the four browsers that didn't take an entire second and a half to pass the Java test Chrome is slightly faster than Safari, but more than fifteen per cent slower than top-ranked Opera.

Safari (v. 3.1.2 [325.21])

Available on: Windows, Mac OS

Selling point: The Mac's default

Pros

Simple and efficient by default

Address enable customizability

Cons:

Many plugins aren't Windows compatible

Lack of predictive address bar

Developed by Apple, ideal for Mac

Shortcuts common to other browsers don't apply

The Safari browser should be the one most familiar to Mac users, and, conversely, the least familiar to Windows users. That's because Apple's proprietary browser was made its debut on Windows PCs in June of last year, controversially bundled with the PC version of iTunes. It was only released as a standalone PC version in March of this year and has yet to give significant traction in the PC world. Since its introduction in early 2003, Safari replaced Netscape Navigator as the Mac's default browser.

The default interface is simple and straightforward. The toolbar at the top has the expected standard buttons (file, edit, view, history, bookmarks, etc.) and the initial layout has a sleek and simple slide-over color scheme.

However, that isn't necessarily the layout you need to stick with. Safari has its own plugins and add-ons you can install if you wish, many of which can be found at PiercySafari.com. Unfortunately, the majority of these will only work on Macs at the moment.

There are many different add-ons that give Safari the abilities of other browsers and compensate for its weaknesses (making searchable address bars, history, etc.) but

as far as Windows users are concerned, Safari is pretty bland and bare-bones. For Mac users I'm sure there's a more to it, but the Windows version is severely limited.

Safari does have a couple of things going for it though. With a built-in RSS feeds spot checker, and a searchable search box, there are a few features that Safari has going for it by default. The address bar also doubles as a fairly accurate loading bar at that helps.

Safari also took up around 75 MB of memory with the four test tabs open. That makes it the second least in terms of efficiency next to Chrome. Not bad, but I suppose if your Safari was totally "cramped" you might get some different numbers.

Java speed test: 400 ms (avg)

Clocking in at 400 ms, Safari is the second slowest browser to take the Java speed test. With Opera managing to come in at around 380 ms, that means that Safari is 1.7 per cent slower. On the other hand, it's more than four times as fast as IE.

Opera (v. 9.60)

Available on: Windows, Mac OS, Linux

Selling point: Speed and customizability

Pros

One of the oldest browsers

Lots of room for customization

Cons:

Some compatibility problems reported

Killer features have been swapped by other browsers

Firefox then most.

Opera is one of the oldest web browsers around, and has made a lot of progress over the years. Originally Opera was not just software, and was only available as two products. It then progressed to being software and now is completely free. While it may sound a little strange nowadays to have a browser that one has to pay for to use, there were reasons behind this. For one thing, Opera was the first browser to offer tabbed browsing. Now a feature that is barely worth mentioning — all of the browsers in this article have it — tabbed browsing was revolutionary when it first came out, as were many of the other features in Opera.

Opera also had plugins before Firefox, although Firefox surely has more plugins now. They're some of the features that you can put into Firefox with add-ons already integrated into Opera by default. The two examples of plugins that I gave — Speed Dial and printers — are available right after installing the browser. Another feature that Firefox borrowed from Opera is session restores. Whenever Opera is closed, the browser will automatically reopen all of the tabs that you were previously working on along with their contents. Any password-encrypted sites, however, will require you to log back in.

Opera has a handy Panels button to the left of the tabs bar, which users may click to access other feature panels. These range from the expected to the unexpected, from bookmarks and history to news and widgets. Widgets are extra features-specific windows that users can download in order to be more productive, or possibly less (Skype.com is a prime example of the latter).

Opera took up about 90 MB of memory with the four test pages open in tabs, which is better than Firefox, but nowhere near as good as Chrome. Still the fact that Opera is better than IE might have something to do with that, considering all of the things that you can do with it before even installing any add-ons.

Java speed test: 321.6 ms (avg)

As the fastest browser tested across the Java test, Opera deserves a good tip of the hat. With all of these aforementioned features and polished plugins, the browser still manages to achieve its goal of combining speed and usability. It also, conversely manages to give a slow way at the top to IE, which is roughly 100 times by being almost two times faster.

Conclusion

While it may be hard or even impossible to pick the "best" of these browsers, each performs differently and has a variety of different features that separates it from the rest of the pack. Depending on your purposes, you may find that you like Firefox for its extensions, or Chrome for its open source nature, or Internet Explorer for its ubiquitous presence.

Our advice is to try the different options out until you find the one that best suits your needs.

By: Doran Nicholson

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Facebook Apps: Awesome or Annoying?

The popular social networking site offers near limitless customizability... for better or worse

Facebook has now exactly what it expects when it visits free profile pages: each public wall posts private messages and most of all, invites to install yet another Facebook add-on. These third-party applications designed to "enhance" your online experience.

There are literally thousands of applications available, and we all have that one friend who has chosen to install each one.

Yes, it seems we're not content to merely tell the world how what we're doing at that precise moment ("Marc is eating a sandwich") catching up with high school friends or showing off photos of our kids to the world — Facebook is now the gateway to more than, ummm, ringtones, board rpgs, horoscopes, or a SuperPoker if that doesn't sound too painful for you.

Apply yourself

It's all fun and games, some of these Facebook applications are pretty cool, such as *Where Has Been*. This application places a world map as your Facebook profile page so you can show others where you've been, where you're based or where you want to go to (and with the latter, you might just get a random Facebook friend to join you). Similarly, *TravelAdvisor* offers another map for Facebook users.

We also like *Music*, a social music application that lets you share and discover music with other Facebook users, share iTunes playlists with friends, access free MP3s to match your taste or sign up for concert notifications when your favourite artists are playing near you.

And then there's *Video and Super Mail*, both of which let you upload videos as including YouTube clips or get more out of your photos by creating collages and slideshows or by drawing over pictures. According to Facebook, Rock N' Roll Super

Mail has more than 18 million active users each month, making it one of the most used apps of all.

Oh, and when you're bored to tears, *MindJolt's* nearly 500 playable minigames can really help make the time fly by with its collection of online puzzle, arcade and strategy diversions.

But for every one of these handy or fun apps, there are 20 annoying ones like *Pet Subspace*, so you can post a friend's virtual pet's bleeds, where emotions show other Facebook users how you're feeling at that time (like, who cares?), *Pg's Talk* (read captions and moments of reflection) and the self-explanatory *Food Fight* application. *Sigh*.

Facebook is fun folk, but remember: less is more!

Facebook security and safety tips

On a related note, a recent report published by the Better Business Bureau of British Columbia says young people are exposing themselves to identity theft by posting personal information on the Internet, especially on social networking sites such as Facebook.

If you (or your kids or younger siblings) are spending time on Facebook — and many millions of Canadians are — then take heed to the following tips on better protecting yourself or loved ones from online scams and other dangers:

1. **Never give out personal info.** Posting your name on your Facebook profile page is perfectly acceptable, but you need not let your address, birth date, phone number, work details or any other private information. Also, be cautious about what kinds of photos you're posting in case they reveal personal info.
2. **Close your network.** Rather than making your profile public to everyone — meaning all your details pop up if someone types in your name or checks in your name on someone else's site — you can choose to close your Facebook network to everyone except for a small group of friends.
3. **Watch your wall.** You might do a good job keeping personal info off your main page but your friends or coworkers might blow it. For example, say you're going on vacation and a disaffected friend rants on your public wall something like "Dude... have fun in Mexico!" Be sure to remove these comments ASAP.
4. **Be wary of farms.** When you sign up for many of the third-party Facebook apps you might be asked to fill out info, so companies can collect names for marketing purposes. Don't fill out every field if you don't feel comfortable about it, such as address, phone number, e-mail and so on.
5. **Use email messages.** Remember, someone's Facebook wall can be viewed by anyone, so before you post a comment or answer to it, ask yourself if it's better as a private email, which only the Facebook user can send.

By Marc Sotomayor



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The Doctor is in

Here's your chance to send your PC woes to our resident Techspert, the HUB PC Doctor

Hi PC Doc

My computer has an ASUS P5300MB SE motherboard and the G drive connects via IDE.

I tried to replace the IDE drive with a SATA drive, but when I try to install Windows XP it does not see the new drive. I have verified that the SATA drive is working. Is there a setting I need to change so XP can find it?

Thanks,
John

Hi John,

The problem you are encountering is due to the fact that the XP installer doesn't have drivers for the hardware that controls the SATA drive. Without these drivers the installer can't "see" the hard drive, thus the installer can't install XP on it. The solution is fairly easy, but will require a floppy drive and a blank floppy disk, so hopefully you have those. First you will need to download the drivers that Windows requires to be able to use the SATA drive. You can get a copy of the drivers at www.intel.com/PN5550. You will want to click the + sign beside the word RAID and download "HS RAID Driver Package Version 1.02 for Floppy Disk installer." Once you have downloaded this, put a blank floppy disk in your disk drive and run the program to create a driver disk.

Once you have made the driver disk you can start installing Windows XP. During the first part of the Windows installation some text will appear at the bottom of the screen that says "Press F6 if you need to install a third party SCSI or RAID driver..." press F6 when this appears. The setup program will detect the floppy disk with the driver on it. Choose to install the driver and then continue the installation. Windows XP setup should now detect your hard drive properly.

Dear PC Doctor

I finally got procrastinating and recently did a full backup up of my C: drive (not D:) drive. The image (about 80 GB) was written on three DVDs. All went well with the first two, but during the verification stage of the third, the computer hung. Does this mean the entire backup is lost and I should try to redo it, or is the data from the first two DVDs recoverable? Is there an easy way to find out what's up? I could live with losing some limited data, but don't want to discover the tragedy at the time comes. This computer in question is an Acer laptop using an inhouse backup program. Thanks.

JV.

JV,

There are a few different reasons the verification could fail. It is possible that it couldn't access one of the files it needed to verify because it was being accessed by another program. The problem with the verification failing is that you can't see what files are not recoverable at the onset of failure. If the first two DVDs contain the Vista installation and programs you have installed and the third and problematic DVD contains all your irreplaceable documents and pictures... you see what I mean. You can try the backup again, but you risk running into the same scenario. Backing up your data makes sense, but you may want to examine how important it is to duplicate your entire Windows installation. Windows tends to get slower as you install and remove software. Many Windows users will attest to how much slower a fresh install of Windows is on the same hardware compared to a one or two year old installation.

If you wish to have a complete backup of your hard drive, the best way to make one is using a USB hard drive or second hard drive, and some kind of bootable disk imaging software. While an additional hard drive may seem expensive, hard drives are often more reliable than burnable media. Bootable disk imaging software will make a exact copy of your hard drive, and do so without having to start Windows. This will ensure that everything is captured properly and since the program is on a bootable media like a CD you can easily restore your Windows installation. One program that offers the ability to make bootable media is Acronis. Try Acronis 15 Home, not available here.

www.acronis.com/homecomputers/products/trueimage/

Once you have an image of your hard drive, you can choose to create a new image whenever you want, and backup important documents to CLOUD between image creation dates.

Hi Doc,

I have a secondary hard drive folder type Master Bootrecord 20 GB that shows up as a device manager as working properly. The problem is that it is not showing up as a second drive in "My Computer." It used to work fine but suddenly disappeared. I hope you can help me solve this as I had some fairly important things stored on it. Thanks,
Brian

Hi Brian

Windows is usually pretty good about keeping track of hard drive letters but given that Windows still sees the device there may be some hope.

Try opening Disk Management by right clicking on "My Computer" and choosing Manage. Along the left hand side of the "Computer Management" window expand the "Storage" category and click on Disk Management. In the top right you should see your disks listed. Assuming Windows is installed on your C drive disk D is the drive that Windows is probably looking for — it should display information stating the Volume is C, the File System as NTFS or FAT32 and the Status as healthy. Look for Disk I. If it displays the disk as healthy and the file system as NTFS or FAT 32 but has no Volume assigned, right click on the volume and choose Change Drive Letter and Paths and select a drive letter.

If the file system is unknown or unrecognized and the data is important you should look the hard drive to a data recovery company. Be aware though that this can be an expensive solution.

Simon Redick is the HUB PC Doctor

Questions, comments and queries can be sent to pubinfo@publinking.ca



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Fun with PowerPoint

Sick of slideshows? Here's how to create a fun game in PowerPoint

Applications like PowerPoint aren't always all about serious presentations. You can easily put your PowerPoint skills to work and use the program to create fun games that anyone can play. This month we have a small game for you to make. You'll use a series of PowerPoint features that would use when creating a presentation but this time the purpose will be entertainment and not work.

In creating this game you'll see how to create random numbers and then use the number to go to a specific slide in your show. You'll see how to write a simple macro and how to attach it to an image. You'll also see how creating a slide show that has no transitions and a single background colour looks more like a regular program and less like a PowerPoint slideshow.

Getting started

The PowerPoint game needs to be simple so it looks more like a program with changing elements than a slide show. To create this effect, start with a new presentation and choose View > Master > Slide Master. Set the background color to a neutral dark color by choosing Format > Background and select the color to use. Remove both text placeholders on the slide and the footer boxes, add a new text box and place the text: *It's time to play the game!*

Choose Insert > Picture > Clip Art and locate and add six images of boxes or bags onto the slide. These are the images the user will see when they first launch the application. Locate an image of someone throwing dice. This image came from the Microsoft Office Clip Art gallery online. When the animated GIF won't play while you're building the slideshow it will play when you run the show later on.

To make the dice image do something you will need a Visual Basic macro. To create your macros choose Tools > Macro > Visual Basic Editor and choose Insert > Module. Type this code into the module window:

```
Private Declare Sub Sleep Lib "kernel32" (ByVal dwMilliseconds As Long)
```

```
Sub rollDice()  
ActivePresentation.SlideShowWindow.View.GotoSlide (1)  
Dim MyValue  
Randomize  
Sleep 1000  
MsgBox  
MyValue = (Int5 * Rnd) + 25  
With SlideShowWindow(1).View  
GotoSlide MyValue  
End With  
End Sub
```

When you are done, choose File > Close and return to Microsoft PowerPoint. This macro uses a random number routine to return a value between two and twenty-five. Ultimately your slideshow will have seven slides and this macro will display any one of the slides when the appropriate dice number is rolled.

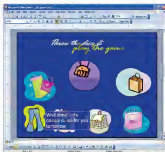
To assign the macro to the dice image, select the image on the slide master, right click it and choose Action Settings. Click the Mouse Click tab, click the Run Macro option and from the dropdown list, choose rollDice and click OK. You can add a sound to the action by downloading a sound, saving it to disk and adding it to the action in the Play Sound area.

Creating the slides

Once you have added the macro action to your image, click the Close Master View button to return to editing your slide. Remove the text placeholders on the slide and then duplicate it by choosing Insert > Duplicate Slide. Repeat this two more times and you have seven slides in total.

Slide 1 appears when the presentation is run so you don't need to do anything to this slide. Slide 2 is the equivalent of throwing a one on the dice. Slide 3 is equivalent to throwing a two and so on. You now need to configure each of these slides to show the "game" that you see if you get that number.

Click slide 2 and create a filled rectangle using the rectangle tool from the drawing toolbar and drag it over the text container to hide it. Now locate and add a picture to the slide that represents the win or loss (or that roll at the dice). For example, for a game of casual dress tomorrow you might use an image of some casual clothing.



The game page is set up with an animated GIF and some simple object images.

Add a textbox to the slide and type some text explaining the prize.

Repeat this for each of the other slides. For each slide you will need to create a filled rectangle over one of the images on the slide and then add an image representing the prize and the text that describes it. One of the six images needs to be covered up on each of the slides.

When you are done, save your PowerPoint file and you're now ready to test it. To do this choose Slideshow > View Show and click the dice to start the game. Every time you click the dice image a different prize will display.

By default PowerPoint is set to prevent macros from running and you may need to alter your macro security level for this application to work. To do this, choose Tools > Macro > Security and set the level to medium, save your file, close it and exit PowerPoint, Restart PowerPoint and reload the application to test it.

Applying the technique

The macro in this game can be used in a regular PowerPoint presentation to take you to a random slide. You could use it to create a tool that plays differently every time the tool is run. Using a slideshow that has essentially the same look for every slide and no slide show transitions creates an application that looks more like a program than a PowerPoint slideshow. How low you set security has to do with a slide master to configure the look at every slide in the presentation without having to do it manually each time.

By Helen Bradley



Building the Ultimate Media PC pt. 1

Gathering the parts for the 10-foot PC

When Microsoft introduced its Media Center Edition version of Windows XP in January of 2002, it laid claim another of its subtle trumps as the lowly PC made its march from basement to den to family space and, finally, into the living room. Or at least, that was the hope. Windows XP Media Center Edition was never released as a stand alone operating system. Instead, it was only volume licensed to system builders. And not your local budget computer shop either. Only PC manufacturers like HP (left) and Sony were able to build systems around this new media-friendly OS.

This move was understandable in many ways. For one, it allowed Microsoft to create a seamless experience and focus its support on a smaller grouping of standardized hardware — TV tuner cards, video cards, audio hardware and the like — and make sure that they worked without issue. However, it also cut off the potential for feedback, as desktop computer builders not involved with Windows XP's new media functions. Computer hardware's fond not to get too bonded Microsoft as they simply don't offer the flexibility for future-proofing a choice of components, upgrades and so on that a custom-built machine does.

While Windows XP Media Center Edition put the media PC movement on the mainstream map, other OS solutions became the driving force within the hobbyist media PC community. Most notably, MythTV, an open source project built on Unix with a Linux and growing client base for common (and not so common) media PC components, support for remote controls and TV-friendly interface (among other things) gave the software a strong foothold among the hardware. MythStation, an Ubuntu installation that contributes back to the larger Ubuntu developer community makes for a system that pulls double duty as both an entertainment interface and, potentially, as a main PC too. The caveat is that, even though Ubuntu is among the friendly desktop camp, you have to be comfortable working within Linux.

Windows Vista — at least in the higher end of its product offerings, the Home Premium and Ultimate editions — bundles in Media Center functions and a large room-friendly window into video and other content that's rated at home when played back on a big plasma or LCD screen, projector or, well, anything bigger than a standard computer monitor. The "10-foot interface," as it's often called.

These media functions, which include recording live TV, switching or authoring DVDs, listening to music and viewing pictures, combined with all the usual Windows Vista standards equate to a computer that really can pull double duty without making potential users to make the switch. It also means that computer hobbyists and desktop computer shops alike can dip their toes into media PC waters without losing the comfortable Windows operating system environment in the process. With that in mind, we're going to embark as a two-part series that endeavors to bring you the Ultimate Media PC build, pulling together the components to build a capable media PC that won't feel out of place in the living room. This first installment will look at the hardware we're going to use. Stay in mind, it's subject to change!

The second installment will follow along with the actual build process and then get the Ultimate Media PC through its paces.

At the end of the series, we'll give the Ultimate Media PC away to one lucky reader. Contest details and entry form are on our website at www.hellomedia.com.

The Case

Thermaltake

DH-121 LP-7001885 - \$240

www.thermaltake.com

We'll be opting for Thermaltake's DH-121 from the Dermal Home chassis series. As tempting as the DH-122 model is with its 7-inch color LCD touch-screen is, the \$240 price tag is a little over the top for our needs.

The DH-121 is a stylish chassis with a piano black case and a black brushed aluminum face. The form factor is more like a desktop than a tower and, thus, combined with the overall look, make it perfectly suited to a home entertainment center effort. A standard lower fronted PC would look out of place.

The DH-121 also ships with a full-sized remote for looking after common media PC functions as well as controlling the cursor on screen. We'll still need a mouse, but for simple functions like launching the media function to watch, record or schedule TV, play a DVD and so on, the virtual mouse on the Thermaltake remote will suffice.

The Power

Cooler Master

UCP-320W RS-700-AMAA-3 - \$185

www.coolermaster.com

As is often the case with custom chasses, some ships without a power supply unit (PSU). This allows users to choose the best PSU for the application, including choosing the wattage, the cooling method, the noise level and other key concerns. We're opting for the quiet UCP line from Cooler Master and choosing the 320-watt model. 320 watts might prove insufficient as a primary or, running dual video cards in SLI (Nvidia) or Crossfire (ATI) along with multiple hard drives and other busches. However, our media PC only needs to run a single video card, saving any available PCI and PCI-E slots for future expansion. This setup will allow us plenty of room to add in more hardware later on — another video card or more hard drives. Balance price and performance, 320 watts should be more than sufficient and will still allow some room for future system additions or expansion.

The CPU

Intel

Core2 Quad Processor Q6600 - \$430

www.intel.ie

The latest in the operating, we're opting for a quad core CPU from Intel, the Q6600 with a 3 GHz clock speed, 12 MB L2 cache and 1333 MHz bus speed. Built on the 45 nm process, the Q6600 packs a lot of punch on a small die. Packing so many transistors into such small real-estate creates a healthy speed boost but also, a lot of heat. A good CPU cooler will be a necessity.

With low users, our CPU will be more than up for whatever tasks we can think to throw at it. With our ideal of recording from multiple sources at once and given that we want to be able to render video quickly and smoothly, the Q6600 is a perfect —



Thermaltake DH-121

if pricey — CPU. We'll also be able to render or record video in the background while doing other computing tasks. An earlier generation CPU would be up to the task and would be an easy way to shave a few hundred dollars off the overall price tag, but would sacrifice some of the performance.

The Motherboard

Intel
Media Series DG45SD —\$145
www.intel.ca

For the sake of simplicity, we're going for an Intel motherboard to go along with our Intel Core2 Quad processor. And a capable mobo it is. With HDMI and DVI-out, the DG45SD is ready to hook up to an HDTV display or your standard computer monitor — or both. With six SATA ports, we'll have plenty of space for hard drives and optical drives alike, with some space for future expansion. Six USB ports plus six USB port headers (for front-mounted USB ports) means we'll have plenty of room to hook up all our digital and video cameras along with other peripherals like a prefer keyboard and mouse.

And as a part of Intel's Media Series of motherboards, it seems an ideal choice. That said, it is in Intel's latest, which leaves us with fewer PCI and PCIe slots available for add-in cards. For expansion, we can use PCIe x16 graphics slot, two x1 PCIe expansion slots and a single PCI slot. Not a lot of room to grow but it should still be sufficient.

The integrated graphics solution on the DG45SD is capable of pushing full HD and beyond, up to 2,048 x 1,536 resolution. It also has native support for H.264, VC1 and MPEG2.

Four DDR2 DIMM slots allow for up to 8 GB of DDR2 RAM. We'll be opting for 4 GB in a 2 x 2 GB configuration, leaving two DIMMs open for expansion.

The on-board graphics solution and the fact that it's HD ready means we could easily get away without using a discrete graphics card. We're adding one in though, which will allow our Media PC to play the latest games, though likely not with all the graphical eye candy turned on.

The RAM

Kingston
KMH600020602/4G —\$75
www.kingston.com

A tough choice. We ended up deciding to go with 4 GB of RAM from Kingston's Value RAM series. This 4 GB is spread across two 2 GB DIMMs, leaving us room to expand later up to 8 GB. Kingston's Value RAM series offers an excellent balance of price and performance, and with 4 GB of the 800 MHz DDR2 RAM, our Media PC should perform well. Doubling the RAM later — a distinct possibility as more is always better — will mean another —\$75 investment. This choice would serve as an inexpensive and easy upgrade that would provide immediate benefits.

The Tuner

Hauppauge
WinTV-HVR-950Q —\$199 (part of Next Logical TV)
www.hauppauge.com

While there are several solutions available, we're opting to use the WinTV-HVR-950Q USB stick. TV and HDTV tuner from Hauppauge is included in part of the Next Logical TV suite. It's a good tune that the tuner is bundled with Logical TV / TiVo PC as the WinTV software that ships with Hauppauge products is slow to load in and far from the most user-friendly software out there.

Included with the bundle is an HDTV antenna for catching free-to-air HDTV broadcasts, an IR blaster for controlling a connected satellite or digital cable box, as well as a TiVo remote.

The Software

Next
LogicalTV —\$199
www.next.ca

While our friends to the southwest enjoy TiVo for several years before it finally arrived in Canada, Next LogicalTV / TiVo PC is launching at the same time both south and north of the 49th.

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www.mantronic.com

It's a compelling package: the excellent Nero LiquidTV software, a TV tuner, antenna, IR blaster and all the cables to hook it up in one box, along with a remote and a 1-year subscription to the TiVo service, including the extensive programming guides and scheduling options.

The beauty of having TiVo as your PC is that it's easier than ever to get TiVo'd content into other formats and transferred to different devices you own, from iPods or other video-capable digital audio players. Is DSD or PS2? While it is possible to get content from a stand-alone TiVo box to your PC by using TiVo's own software, it's far from a simple endeavor. Recording TiVo content directly to a PC hard drive eliminates the format and email problems; it's as simple as physically moving the content between the TiVo box and the PC.

The Storage

Western Digital

Cover Black 1 TB WD1000GL-SRL - \$249

www.westerndigital.com

Our case has three 3.5-inch drive bays (for hard drives) and one 5.25-inch bay for optical media. We're opting for a secure 1 TB hard drive but that storage could easily be upgraded later.

The WD1000GL-SRL drive is only referred to as the 1 TB Cover which we'll do from here on in as a SATA drive, as we all readers hard drives on the market. We're opting for Western Digital here gives the company's excellent reputation, extensive product line and low drive failure rates.

This is a 7,200 RPM drive with a 32 MB cache with a transfer rate of up to 3 Gbps. Since we'll be doing a lot of recording of live TV as well as transferring home videos to the Media PC for editing, we would want it not being given away, slower capacity and transfer speed are of utmost importance. While opting for a solid-state drive (SSD) might be tempting given the super fast access times they offer, the cost per GB is too high to be practical. And in a PC whose killer app is going to be recording and playing back TV broadcasts along with home movies, feature films and more, capacity is king.

The Media

Pioneer

4x Blu-ray DVD Burner BD-R2202BK - \$199

www.pioneer.com

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Coming up

Next month we'll detail the actual build process of our Ultimate Media PC. We'll also include all the requisite software and we'll report on the results of our benchmarking and testing. When that's all done we'll give the Ultimate Media PC away to one lucky reader.

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By Andrew Moore-Chapman

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Everybody's Got Something to Hide

Online anonymity: The sanctity of your online information

"If you haven't done anything wrong, you should have nothing to hide." This is the commonplace notion of those who stand opposed to the concept of privacy, if not total anonymity in the wired world of today. I can't tell you how many times I've heard these words spoken or read them in a forum when the topic seems to be the latest excess of surveillance, snooping or lawsuits launched on the recording and film industry associations, the RIAA and MPAA respectively. So, how well does this argument stand up? What does the data you inevitably generate as you sit about your daily life say about you and how given that you see a line today, where is it anything but innocuous?

Currently, the majority of this information resides in a variety of sites, such as servers of other firms or your personal data scattered about the digital domain. However, in a previous article on the topic of Web 3.0 or the Semantic Web, I endeavored to outline the recent attempts to allow servers to talk to each other by employing mechanisms whereby they could understand the nature of the content they contained and the services they were rich capable of delivering. This mechanism allows them to cooperate in achieving complex data mining tasks including building an accurate profile of you.

On the list

This profile is an ever-expanding electronic fingerprint which, as its extension as the digital world becomes more complete, is starting to its breadth and scope. Its barriers to information sharing came tumbling down, the more ready your private life becomes information-sharing. Elements of traditional data records include the following: Purchasing history, credit rating, marital status, medical records, travel history, driving record, banking activity, criminal record, and so on. However, new sources of available data, freely offered up by users online, may include: Games, political leanings, tastes in entertainment, sexual orientation, physical location histories, religious beliefs, friends, etc.

So what? Still have nothing to hide? Let's turn the argument on its head shall we? If I were to say to you instead, "Should you agree that identity theft is a huge problem and that you should take measures to protect yourself from it?" I'm certain you'd nod your head in concurrence.

Essentially, everyone has something to hide. Whether or not that something is relevant is another matter entirely and shouldn't really enter the debate. Let's leave that obvious example aside however, and explore not what might happen, but what has already happened in relation to the misuse of personal data.

One sure thing is...

You may have found that our neighbors to the south have concocted this wonderful system that enables them to determine who is a terrorist and who is not well in advance of any crime being committed. As a result of this fabulous, patented algorithm which collects data from all available sources and provides you with a succinct score on the terrorist scale, they have now been able to remove over a million prospective air travelers from the rolls at who is eligible to do so. Success! I can hear the chiming of champagne flutes from here.

Small children, political figures, journalists' muscums and the like who have found themselves on the really bad map gain comfort in the fact that, as they take the usual screening train ride across America ensuring that the model at hand is in fact available to them, at least the greater good for the greater number has been maintained and prevented from loss-expecting their newly discovered terrorist pastiches.

In a previous generation it was consumers' next came drug users; then pedophiles and terrorists became the holy grails of western society. Laws and attitudes change with the times, however, a trend towards our post facto (after the fact) cameras has been taking place. These are corrections for "crimes" which took place before the act in question had indeed been disclosed a crime.

A day after web

How many people who supported the Taliban before 9/11 monetarily or in fact, online, were subsequently incarcerated despite the fact that those activities, though certainly reprehensible, were not illegal at the time they were committed? "Well, good," you might say. "They got what they deserved." The problem is that these extreme examples elicit extreme reactions. Let's examine the more mundane. Activities once not illegal to now may be illegal they be

discovered online and brought to public light. The barbarism of violating public opinion spaces which leads to all sorts of unintended consequences. Post a photo at your child's in the suburbs and perhaps you should get ready to be charged with child pornography. Don't expect the paper to report on your subsequently being found not guilty, should that would be needed. Other more controversial rumors in an online debate and watch your job prospects evaporate in prospective employers probe Google's lens memory. Or worse, a price only arises in support of ending an associate war and be prosecuted — years later — to obtain the new security clearance required by your employer should that rally have attracted some "people of interest."

Staying off the radar

The opinion has been proffered that total information awareness equals security. In fact, the opposite is more likely to be the case. Ask any survivor of the Japanese internment camps whether they thought the "loyalty" question on the census meant much at all when they were filling that task daily by completing it. The less your neighbour or government knows about the personal details of your life, the better off you are for it. This is certainly not as true in western democracies as it is in totalitarian and communist states.

So, in this age of ubiquitous monitoring and data collecting, how does one undertake online activities with some measure of anonymity? There are many tools at your disposal to obfuscate your location and identity while online including the Electronic Frontier Foundation's Tor (www.torproject.org). For anonymous e-mailing, check out Mailinator (www.mailinator.com) or for a completely secure and private version of the Internet, why not give Icaros (www.icarosproject.org) a try. It's time to give the Doctor and his new neighbour a little bit of respect.

By Dan Belcher

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The Online Photo Album

Finding a needle in the photo sharing haystack

There are now a lot of photo sites. don't you think? Unless you spend the last few years off planet, you know that the Net has become a huge repository for digital photographs. Flickr marked the two billionth photo posted more than a year ago. Photobucket's most popular is taking care of over 50 billion images. This enormous amount of photographs makes it a painkiller: how do you find exactly what you are interested in seeing?

At the most basic level every photo hosting site gives you a lot to choose from. Every time you go to your favorite photo site you'll find a fresh batch of images. No longer time-restricted — just click and drag. What sites are designed to provide different means each time you visit and the tenderness of presentation is also engaging — you never know what you might see from one session to the next.

With 3 DDD keywords

Search sites use non-descriptive keywords so you can ask virtually any descriptive word that pops into your head and use it to search for images: cities, countries, natural formations, colours, adjectives, months or common objects. The traditional photographic genres like landscape or black-and-white work too.

Sounds good so far, but because of the sheer volume of images being posted from the most common/unusual or obscure keyword can produce thousands or thousands of hits. To improve search success, you need to cast a net with a finer mesh and go beyond the simple keyword search.

Flickr favours the term "tag" instead of keyword, and on its site you can refine your searches by using tag clusters. Clusters are groups of tags that most often appear together. Implemented by Flickr a few years ago, clusters can refine searches, but can also take you off into a completely different direction. For example, one of the tags clustered around the primary tag "flower" is "macro". If you follow macro, you can see how looking at collections of close-up photography

that have nothing to do with flowers.

Other developers have developed new ways to search on Flickr's tagging system. The Galaxy (galaxytag dot com) is a solar system metaphor to visually refine search parameters. "Spice in the Ice" (Circles) shows it as the central "planet" with smaller satellite tags with labels such as Toronto, lakes, BC, and so on orbiting it. Click on one of the satellites and it is promoted to the central body position around which other satellites orbit. Successively clicking on the satellites refines the search, but if you click on the central body the search retraces its ends and the satellite begins to populate the sphere with thumbnails. You can then type the "planet" to see all the thumbnails of the search result. One product of Flickr's data mining efforts is the term "autocomplete". Flickr describes autocomplete as "a ranking algorithm based on user behaviour around the search." These could include factors such as the number of comments a photo receives, how many times it has been viewed or ranked as a favorite, etc.

From intertagginess to usability

Flickr has used *tagspinner* (tagspinner dot com) as an interestingness along with tags: big ones, groups, users and other data to mine interesting sets of images. When I heard in "findtags" I've liked searched Flickr were a number of tags such as HDR (high dynamic range) and architecture, two pairs such as bridge-night, and a number of users who presumably had made some reference to bridges in their descriptions or comments. I've liked it, just one of more than 100 tags that have been developed using Flickr's Application Programming Interface.

Other sites are also using social networking techniques to refine searchability of images. Last year for example, Photobucket added Diggability to its photos, and now its popular macro page lists images having the most Diggings.

While Yahoo-owned Flickr is today's dominant photo sharing site, Picassa, now owned by Google, is a

relatively new kid on the block. It has portrayed its photo album software into a photo sharing site. One of Picassa's recent developments is face-based tagging. The site uses clustering technology to group photos with similar faces. This allows you to batch name them rather than finding and naming them one at a time.

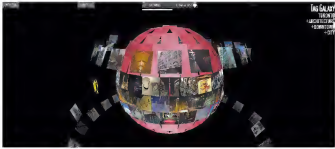
Learning your photo friend

Google acquired another property called Picasaweb which specializes in geotagged photos. Geotagging has become its own special interest group on many photo sites. For photographers, it helps to write location information into the metadata fields of the images before uploading them to Picasaweb — the database automatically sorts the fields and maps the images, so according to the site isn't much different than uploading regular images. However, it's not essential. You can also geotag after the fact, if you happen to know the location coordinates for the photo, or if it is a landmark location that is easy to locate on a map, such as the CN tower.

As you might expect, Picasaweb uses Google Earth as its mapping engine, and so does Picassa. In addition to geotagged content, Picassa has a prime on its home page called *Where in the World?* that makes good use of Google Earth. It's simple but addictive — random photos appear next to a map of the world and you have to guess where the photo was taken. Flickr has a huge store of geotagged photos and uses Where Maps as the underlying mapping engine, but has one developer who has figured out how to use Google Maps to map Flickr's geotagged images.

With Flickr and Picasaweb, geotagged photos are processed differently — a map is the dominant feature with map pins or hot areas to indicate photos that can be viewed at various locations. However you can use the same search tools available in the rest of the site from simple tags to data mining systems in order to find images.

By David Szalko



Online Dating

Looking for love in all the virtual places

Who among us can honestly say they envision the conclusion of a relationship when they embark into one? While the joy of discovery is still as fresh, when the hearts between each date seem to stretch into days, when that chemical connection is so strong that every shared experience throws you into a state of euphoria, how can you possibly think of that time when you might separate—forever?

All the statistics are for tears upfront. Give or take a few percentage points, one of every two marriages in Canada will end prematurely. So while it may be true that nobody gets married to get divorced, half of us do end up that way, against our best efforts.

This may not be particularly problematic for younger guys and girls, who gravitate in circles where the majority of their friends and associates are still single, and are fairly likely to spend a chunk of their social time in bars and clubs that cater to the under-30 crowd. But what about those of us over the age of 30? Or 40? Or 50, for that matter? What do we do when we're on the prowl?

We could hang out with our married friends, hoping against hope they might finally invite some other single person along—but more likely will end up watching reruns of movies and playing board games. We could hit the neighbourhood pub where we might, it seems really likely, find that perfect match amongst the usual parade of no- or down-to-earth and down-drunk. Heck, we could even become a regular at the local produce store, gutturally hoping we might inadvertently touch hands with our dream spouse while sorting through the overripe tomatoes.

A brand new world

Or we could go online. Once regarded as a last resort for total losers, hoards of otherwise fine folk in the real world—online dating sites have come a long way

Indeed, when you consider the alternatives and the other potential scenarios (see above), online dating may be one of the best options today—especially for those too old for nightclubs but far too young to pick up on line.

Before you mock the idea entirely, consider the following:

Online dating gives a lone, way-loved-including geographical barriers. In the "real" world, chances are your sphere of interaction extends just a few miles. Online, you can meet someone from thirty or forty miles away and as easily as people from your own neighbourhood. Granted, you may want to think twice before responding to that supposedly sexy note from a gorgeous 25-year-old "supermodel" (starlet in some unrecognizable third-world country) but it generally goes without saying that your chances of meeting the right person are that much more enhanced when your horizons are broadened.

When you meet someone online, you'll have at least some idea in advance as to what makes them tick. Are they a sophisticated romantic or a party animal? Do they enjoy extreme sports or extreme unique hobbies? Are they happy and confident with themselves, or do they still carry a crated obsession for their most recent partner that manifests itself in daily stalling abuse?

Unlike hooker ink hot dogs, online dating sites theoretically contain no filler. Everyone who signs up is there for one reason—to meet Mr. or Ms. Right. The same cannot be said for the shopping mall. Or the office. Or even the local watering hole, where you're more apt to find three shots in the wrist. Karaoke nights, then, a future wife or husband.

For most of us, it's simply easier to take that tentative first step, conceal a good opinion, line, and deal with possible rejection when we're not in a face-to-face situation. Furthermore, unless you're one of those

lucky guys or girls who simply exude self-confidence, you'll likely find it easier to approach really gorgeous people online than on the street. There's just something about the buffer of the Internet that makes the whole process less intimidating.

Going solo

Of course, online dating is not without its pitfalls, arguably the most important being the simple yet undeniable fact that not all sites are equal. Indeed, while some online dating services deliver tremendous bang for the buck and are totally and completely above-repudiation efforts are—substantially less expensive.

Certainly there's no shortage of alternatives. One of the most popular choices in this country is eHarmony (www.eharmony.ca), a matchmaking service touts both comparatively privacy and comparatively strict. It does not cater to gay individuals, it won't help you if you're merely "asexual" (you must be biologically male) and it discourages open, unadorned communication between its members. Instead, it orchestrates a series of parameters and personality traits to match you with others, then passes the results on to you and allows interaction from there.

Substantially different is Plenty of Fish (www.plentyoffish.com). The most important distinction between Plenty of Fish and eHarmony is price—the former is completely free. And while that's great news for those of us who don't believe in sinking single dollars into the search for our perfect mate, the downside is that a freebie site encourages those who might exaggerate the truth. Still, a no-churn service that promotes freedom of interaction between members doesn't restrict on the basis of sexual preference or marital status, and is based right here in Canada (Vancouver, to be exact) is a pretty good thing. Lovelife (www.lovelife.com) is a sophisticated site that



offer its members perks such as e-mail and instant messaging, webcam support, a variety of discussion forums, and three distinct "conversations" (Dating, Relationship, and Intimate). Lovelife charges for its service, but those charges aren't as steep as some other sites and they do serve to reduce the number of inane participants.

Blind Date as Canadian Speed Dating Service: 25dates.com (www.25dates.com) intends to bring you together for a series of three-minute encounters with up to twenty-five potential suitors. The downside? If twenty-five consecutive three-minute dates doesn't turn you, maybe psychological limitations will. After all, what are the chances of ever finding twenty-five other singles in your size bracket when you live in Mississauga? After all?

If, conversely, you reside in the city and have money to burn, it's just Lunch (www.thelunch.com) and not only act as a matchmaking service, but also act as you and your date go to a top-notch restaurant — then eliminating safety concerns.

Prepare Yourself

There are, usually, dozens more online dating sites from which to choose. Unfortunately, many of them are not without risks. Some, for example, have been known to send false, inappropriate, or provocatively indecent messages. The key is to know in advance what you're getting into. Check the membership numbers — particularly "active" members — and see how many are situated within a reasonable distance. Decide if you prefer sites that offer unfettered e-mail and chat capabilities, and act accordingly. Google your favorite sites for professional reviews and user opinions.

Look carefully at the membership email and make sure yours isn't on the hook for more money than you can afford or a longer time period than you want. If possible, sign up for a "freebie" trial or a reduced-price membership and look carefully at both the demographics and the quality of the members. Ultimately, weed out the sites that don't work for you and experiment with a trial membership at the sites you like. It won't take long to recognize which service you most enjoy frequenting.

Believe the best site is no guarantee of a successful dating experience. Your humble writer has dedicated portions of 2006 to... researching various sites and delving into the world of online dating after spending much of his adult life in a long-term relationship... and can attest to the uncertainty of the process. Why, it seems like only yesterday when the mating hook of a 1988 Nissan thumped into his driveway. Conning off the site of the amiable monstrosity but thankful to escape died before it could explode, he barreled out the front door and down the street in the hopes that a more approachable woman awaited in the driver's seat. Alas, those hopes were bumped faster than a ball in a snooker pit.

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It wasn't just the circa-1970s Harley tank top. Or the fanny. Or the pronounced belly, emerging to and lie below the bottom. It was! It the implied attitude that immediately caused me memories of Archie Bunker at his worst or even that she'd stretched the truth substantially about her age.

No, it wasn't any of the above. It was that this woman had somehow made it through the screening process. She'd passed a picture of herself and, frankly, at her online bio. She'd supported her profile with recent photographs that gave no indication of her current condition. And during each and every phone call, she'd spoken without the slightest awareness that now seemed so obvious.

Length in the face of danger

Ultimately, she and her beauty automobile would disappear into the night, and no real harm was done. Yet the lesson had been learned. Thank no one. It's a lesson that everyone considering the online dating world should remember.

Don't, for example, rely on e-mails and photos as reliable processors to a first date. Instead, get the phone number of your prospective suitor and really talk it up. Are they better over paid romance? Are they pleased by verbal sparring itself? Does your crush ever get the hint? Do they like to laugh, or are they too serious for their own good?

Ask them a few hard-hitting questions — they shouldn't mind at all if they have nothing to hide. And, if you're pursuing a relationship rather than a one-off relationship, keep the level of communication open for a week or more before meeting to determine if the object of your desire is just as interested in a future. Pick a busy public location for that first get-together, take a cell phone along with you, and tell a few friends where you're going — and when plans change. And when you arrive, by your best friend and have fun. Remember, one date isn't really a big deal in the grand scheme of things. There's always plenty more fish in the online dating sea.

By Gord Gable

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Cons

No DDR3 support
Current AMD CPUs are slightly less powerful than Intel's

Ever since the introduction of the Core Duo Intel has been steadily eating away at the ground AMD worked so hard to gain with their Athlon line of processors. It's a shame, too, because it's not that AMD's latest Phenom processors aren't decent enough but rather that Intel has really stepped up its game. Luckily AMD has continued to fight the good fight, releasing plenty of intriguing products in order to stay back of those Athlon XP units at a few prices ago. Ironically, in the chipset department AMD has experienced quite a bit of growth in the past couple of years due to its acquisition of graphics chip designer, ATI. It's no surprise that their integrated graphics solutions are some of the best available and are also offered at surprisingly competitive prices. As you'll find out in this review of Gigabyte's GA-MA790GP-DS4H, their latest 790GX chipset is no exception.

The graphics in the 790GX

At the heart of the MA790GP-DS4H is the 790GX northbridge, whose claim to fame is an integrated DirectX10 Shader Model 4.0 capable Radeon HD3300. The Radeon HD3300 is trumped only by the benefits of which Gigabyte has attached the GPU to reach its maximum potential. This is the first integrated graphics processor I have seen that has not only a standard DVI-D and DVI connector but also has an HDMI port built directly into the motherboard's rear I/O panel (see Ultimate Video PC motherboard, the latest DS4SD features a similar HDMI port). Though they are rare now, Gigabyte has gone ahead and made sure the connector itself adheres to the latest HDMI 1.3 certification in order to deliver the highest available digital audio and video signal as well.

The MA790GP-DS4H is compatible with two different multi-GPU graphics card configurations by delivering both ATI's Hybrid Graphics and traditional CrossFireX support. Hybrid Graphics is essentially a CrossFireX setup that utilizes the onboard Radeon HD3300 as one of the two cards in the setup. If, of course, you'd rather have the best at the best, there are also two full-sized PCI-E 2.0 x16 slots on the motherboard as well. This makes upgrading from entry-level all the way up to ultra high-end feasible on the MA790GP-DS4H—everything from using the included GPU to having two 4870 X2s for nearly five teraflops of graphics pushing power is possible.

Another cool graphics-related feature of the MA790GP-DS4H is the inclusion of 128 MB of Memory Select 1333 MHz DDR3 and its SelectPort memory. Where most integrated graphics solutions borrow memory from the system RAM when referred to as "integrated memory" and is usually adjustable in the BIOS, Gigabyte has decided to use the additional 128 MB to try and eliminate the memory bottleneck associated with sharing slower system RAM. With its SelectPort memory, the integrated graphics

performance puts in increases of as much as 10 per cent, further shrinking the gap between competitors' onboard graphics offerings.

Routing of the I/O

Joining AMD's 790GX northbridge is their newly outgoing SB750 southbridge. Typically the southbridge is responsible for all of the I/O functions of the chipset—the slower PCI bus, SATA ports, integrated audio, networking, the USB and FireWire ports, etc.

In the past AMD's southbridges were, for lack of a better word, weak. Comparisons were made that the other chipset manufacturers had no problems achieving, which put AMD at a disadvantage. Fortunately the SB750 has everything we've come to expect from a chipset released this early, so when booting up with the 790GX the bus make only a team.

Aside from all the above standards like 12 USB 2.0 ports, six SATA ports, a FireWire Port and ALU889A HD audio codec, the SB750 is also to give AMD's Phenom processors an additional overclocking boost (if you choose to overclock, that is). Included in the southbridge is AMD's Embedded Controller for AMD OverDrive and Advanced Clock Calibration (thankfully dubbed ECAC/ACC).

Maximize OverDrive

Looking up with the SB750's ECAC/ACC is AMD's OverDrive software. This software suite can be accessed through the GUI to not only overclock with the click of a mouse, but also to monitor all of your system's settings (voltages, temperatures, etc). They've also included an automated system feature application to create system stability when breaking.

The OverDrive software is so straightforward that it seems as if AMD is trying to make a point of being overcautious. In fact, I'm almost convinced that AMD is encouraging users to try breaking their system as the software is easy enough for even entry-level users to understand and use.

Not to be outdone by AMD, Gigabyte has also put their own personal spin on the GA-MA790GP-DS4H. The wonderful Ultra Durable 2 makes its return, so the improvements made to the SB750 southbridge for stability are compounded further with shielded capacitors and sturdy design. Gigabyte has also gone along and attached all-weather passive heatshields to cool potentially vulnerable components. The intention at Ultra Durable 2 is to increase system stability and component longevity in even the most grueling conditions.

The Gigabyte touch

Gigabyte's DualBIOS has also been added to the MA790GP-DS4H, so you needn't fear a failed flash attempt. Generally speaking, the warning you won't update the BIOS since an improper flash will leave you with a dead motherboard. But with DualBIOS you have no need to worry in there, as the two physically separate BIOS chips on the motherboard will save the other automatically when avoiding the catastrophic situation.

Another perk that Gigabyte threw in with high quality audio in the form of Dolby Home Theatre with support for 7.1 audio channels as well as two additional independent stereo channels. Not only is the audio quality better than the standard, but Dolby Home Theatre certification reassures that the device completely supports Blu-ray's lossless audio as well. When you consider the motherboard's built-in HDMI port, the MA790GP-DS4H could make for one heck of a home theatre PC.

Conclusion

Supporting all AMD and AMD+ processors (even up to a whopping 140 watts), having HyperMem 3-D, and support for DDR 1066 MHz (1333 MHz officially) means the Gigabyte GA-MA790GP-DS4H should be a viable option for quite a while. Tack on the incredible room for graphics card expandability and this board has quite a bit of future-proofing as its sleeve. With that said, the board's highlight feature is its integrated graphics, is currently the best available, so if you choose to forego without discrete graphics hardware you'll still be able to play the latest HD multimedia and games. The GA-MA790GP-DS4H is another reason why we shouldn't completely count out AMD.

By Mike Palumbo



Power Pellets: Top 10 PC Game Studios

These development companies hold the fragile future of PC gaming in their collective hands

The PC used to be the platform of choice for players interested in experiencing the latest and most advanced role-playing games, first-person shooters, and real-time strategy games. However, the last decade has seen a steady stream of talented PC game development studios redistributing their talents and energies to the world of console gaming. While companies like BioWare (Neverwinter Nights), Epic Games (Gears of War), and EA G (Battlefield) continue to make PC titles, their focus has undeniably shifted toward the more lucrative Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 markets. But it isn't all doom and gloom for hardcore PC gamers. There are several developers that remain quite dedicated to the Windows platform. Ten of them are listed below, along with the means by which they will contribute to the PC gaming industry in the near future.

Bleeding Entertainment

What they've done: The Diablo games, StarCraft, World of Warcraft

What they're doing: Developing Diablo 3, StarCraft 2, content for World of Warcraft. Not much explanation is given here. Blizzard made one of the most profitable PC video games of all time at making World of Warcraft. What's more, they remain completely focused on PC gaming. Lots of players are dying to get their fingers on the latest Windows exclusive: Diablo 3 and StarCraft 2 games.

San Powered Games

What they're doing: The Dungeon Siege series, Supreme Commander

What they're doing: Creating new PC-exclusive games. Space Siege and Dungeon Siege Powered Games' epic Dungeon Siege RPGs have proven worthy competition to Diablo in the dungeon crawling category, but the Redmond-based studio is branching out with the upcoming PC-only games Space Siege 2a and themed action RPGs and Dungeon Siege RPG/RTS hybrid.

A.C.E.S. (subdivision of Microsoft Game Studios)

What they're doing: The Microsoft Flight Simulator games

What they're doing: Developing MSFS 11.

Among the longest running active game franchises (the first edition was made back in 1977), the Flight Simulator games have a massive stable following. A major one dedicated to the franchise, and scores of developers creating new add-on content. As long as the Windows platform exists, new Flight Simulator games will be made.

Crytek

What they've done: Far Cry, Crysis, the CryENGINE

What they're doing: Marketing CryENGINE 2

Crytek has earned out a reputation for creating the most technologically sophisticated games around, but their main contribution to PC gaming has been the CryENGINE. The software that shines and the amazing graphics seen in their games. Crytek is currently trying to license CryENGINE 2 — which powers the acclaimed Crysis franchise — to other developers.



The Creative Assembly

What they're doing: The Total War games

What they're doing: Developing Empire: Total War, Stormes

This U.K.-based studio has used its Total War franchise to deliver some of the most epic and compelling real-time strategy games of the last decade, and will soon be adding a fresh entry in the form of the American-revolution-themed Empires: Total War, which is set for release early next year. Also watch for Stormes, an original postapocalyptic RTS game.

Fireaxis Games

What they're doing: Anything preceded by Sid Meier's name

What they're doing: It's unknown for now, but Civilization V is a pretty good bet

Fireaxis has divided its console gaming over the years, but they always come back to Windows — and with good reason. The PC is still the only platform that facilitates the sort of sophisticated but accessible interface necessary to let players dig deeply into Fireaxis' particular brand of turn-based strategy.

Valve Corp.

What they're doing: The Half-Life games, the Steam digital distribution platform

What they're doing: Refining Steam, creating a new Half-Life 2 episode

Nowadays, Valve remains most at their games on consoles as well as PC. However, the company's real value to the PC gaming community is Steam, a digital distribution system that hosts 440 games, has some 15 million active users, and was recently rumored to have caught a long-term prize from Google.

Mass Software

What they're doing: The Sims games, Spore

What they're doing: Developing supplementary content for Spore

The Sims games are second only to Nintendo Mario games in total number of franchise units sold, and they're still going strong. However, the recently released evolution simulator Spore — which happens to be PC-only (but counting a dedicated console version available for the Nintendo DS) — has given the company's latest a new focus.

Turbine Inc.

What they're doing: Dungeons & Dragons Online, The Lord of the Rings Online, the Asheron's Call games

What they're doing: Developing new content for Lord of the Rings Online

With three successful MMORPG franchises under their belts, Turbine is a force to be reckoned with in online gaming. Their titles may not have the same appeal base as World of Warcraft, but they're nonetheless quite polished and critically adored. MMOs of Mass: a new expansion to Lord of the Rings Online is set to hit shelves Nov. 18.

Relic Entertainment

What they're doing: Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War, Company of Heroes

What they're doing: Developing Warhammer 40,000: Dawn of War 2, Company of Heroes Online

A THQ subsidiary based in Vancouver, Relic delivered one of the most engaging action/strategy games in recent years in the WW-themed Company of Heroes. They're currently working on an online edition for the booming Asian market, as well as a sequel to the successful Warhammer series of real-time games.

By Chad Szechenyi

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The Last Byte

The Social Net @ work



or his earlier *Soaps*. Agenda item for the next caucus meeting. On the Net, smart was virtual both faster.

South of the border headlines blared that the Obama people: Tattered — a sure sign that they were “with it.” And everywhere, YouTube was both political slump and already out-of-control.

As an event concentrated in time, the election provides like-like conditions to study the impact of social networking on stimulating discussion as well as influencing and tracking opinion. There will no doubt be many doctoral theses written on the impact of the big sphere on the 2008 elections as after Web 2.0 summations on the upturn of the election post.

In business, the short-term intensity of an election campaign is missing, but companies are attracted to these new technologies for many of the same reasons: targeted impact. It's the new sign of business savvy to have access post blogs on the corporate website or to pitch on YouTube.

At the beginning of October the Conference Board of Canada announced its report on business and the Social Net. In Customer and the Web: Web-based Solutions That Improve Customer Acquisition, Loyalty and Retention the Conference Board presents five web-based strategies for improving the stickiness between companies and their customers.

The magic lies on the Conference Board list are blogging, podcast and webcast

based marketing, mobile (smartphone) marketing, social networking sites and direct-to-purchase sales channels.

What the board is underlining is something some businesses have already understood and implemented. As a tech writer I get a steady stream of e-mail from businesses asking me to lay this or that new service they provide on the Net. Blogging also involved in publishing. I have a better interest in books related to that industry. Book publisher O'Reilly comes to mind as a paper-based company that has transformed itself and is now fully engaged on the Net. Sure you can buy books online from O'Reilly's site, but that's not necessarily the most compelling draw — nor the biggest potential revenue stream. O'Reilly's tech books, such as the *Linux Network* series are popular and cover a broad range of subjects.

But after them and selling the books, O'Reilly allows you to access them through a free-based service called *Learn Books Online*. The company's School of Technology offers self-paced courses with credit towards a certificate from the University of Illinois that further support its book business.

O'Reilly has also moved into the tech conference business, hosting conferences on many technology topics that cover the same subjects as the books they sell, including the Web 2.0 conferences since 2004. O'Reilly Media Inc. CEO Tim O'Reilly is also often credited with introducing the term Web 2.0.

OK, I don't want to turn this into a bid for O'Reilly, but I know people working in other book publishing companies and they play towards the online ecology and digital economy are nowhere near as involved.

It's a common problem with all businesses whose players hold have been turned upside down because of the force of the Net. If you look at the Conference Board's five web-based strategies post I see commonalities with the thesis that O'Reilly has implemented.

Some will get it and grow, some won't.

Until next time,
David Tanaka

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